Educational Considerations

Recruitment and Retention of Black Students in Graduate Programs

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How student retention relates to advisor–advisee relationships and/or curriculum.

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Introduction

Colleges and universities are becoming increasingly concerned with recruiting Black students for admission into graduate programs. Pruitt and Isaac (1985) suggest that institutions of higher education have recognized that enrolling students with different cultural, experiential, and cognitive styles into graduate programs increases the diversity in graduate education. The diversity of graduate education can be enhanced by including a culturally diverse student population and/or by incorporating multicultural perspectives into graduate curriculum. Thus, increases in recruitment efforts targeting Black graduate students is one of the ways universities demonstrate commitment to diversity. While recruiting and admitting Blacks are important steps for programs committed to diversity, it is important to realize that additional steps must also be taken to increase the likelihood of successful completion. A total commitment to cultural diversity includes an awareness of the unique issues involved in recruiting and retaining Black graduate students. Some alternative approaches to recruiting Black graduate students and issues related to Black student retention in graduate programs are discussed in this article.

Recruiting

Many university departments tend to establish rather stable recruitment channels. Pruitt and Isaac (1985) suggest that the most prominent channels of recruitment include the "old boy network" and alumni who refer relatives and friends. Other channels include recruiting at a select group of undergraduate colleges and using a limited advertising media (e.g., brochures). Reliance upon these channels has proven quite advantageous for White students.

Using these channels in order to recruit Black graduate students, however, may not result in the same advantages for this group. Historically the "old boy network" has not in-

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cluded Blacks and it is rare when this tradition is broken. Students who are most likely to benefit from this network are those students who have access to the network. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that Black graduate students will be identified in significant numbers via this channel.

Recommendations from alumni of institutions have a great potential for aiding in the recruitment of Black graduate students. However, this channel often fails to be a viable resource for identifying potential Black graduate students. A contributing factor to this negative outcome may be due to the poor retention rate of Blacks in predominantly White undergraduate institutions (Olson, 1988). Also, there may be few alumni who can identify potential Black graduate students from the pool of undergraduates who complete bachelor degrees.

Recruiting at a few select undergraduate colleges may also fail to produce Black graduate student applicants. Perhaps this failure can be better understood if one examines what is meant by the words "select colleges." Typically, select colleges are limited to predominantly White institutions in which the enrollment of Black undergraduate students is minimal and the percentage of Blacks from these institutions pursuing graduate training is even lower (Heller, 1986).

Given these realities, how can universities improve their recruitment of Black students at the graduate level? Graduate programs that are committed to recruiting Black graduate students must establish new approaches to attract Black students. A prolonged period of investment may be necessary before the new approaches become as efficient as the channels used to recruit White students (Pruitt & Isaac, 1985).

Administrators of graduate institutions must realize that the recruitment of Black students will be greatly enhanced if positive relationships are established and maintained with Black professionals. For example, many graduate institutions have Black administrators and/or faculty who may be willing to recruit Black students. Black professionals at universities are potentially valuable resources for identifying prospective applicants through community networks or as a result of affiliation with predominantly Black institutions. Black administrators and faculty may be more willing to recruit Black students if the respective recruiting institution treats them as respected professionals. In addition, the way in which Black administrators and faculty are treated may influence Black applicants' desire to attend a graduate institution. For instance, if the contributions of Black faculty are not respected or valued by an institution, Black applicants have very little reason to believe that their work or contributions will be respected. Thus, it seems important for graduate institutions to realize the significance of establishing positive working relationships with its Black administrators and faculty.

Another approach to recruiting Black graduate students involves establishing a positive working relationship with institutions that have a high success rate for producing Black graduates who are interested in pursuing graduate degrees. Traditionally, predominantly Black institutions have been successful in producing black students who go on to complete graduate degrees (Pruitt & Isaac, 1985). Overlooking these valuable resources (i.e., Black administrators and faculty, predominantly Black colleges and universities) represents a very limited commitment to recruitment and cultural diversity.

Retention

Broadening the existing recruiting strategies at graduate institutions only partially addresses some of the issues

Black students face. Graduate programs must be able to retain and graduate Black students who can contribute to their respective fields of study. If the commitment to recruiting is carried out to its fullest, the graduate environment must be conducive to, appreciative, and accepting of the cultural diversity that Black graduate students may bring (Phelps, 1989).

There seems to be a variety of factors which influence Black student success in graduate programs. A growing number of studies have indicated that nonacademic factors, such as interpersonal relationships, social and academic integration, and the ability to deal with racism are important in predicting achievement for Black undergraduate students (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985; Williams & Leonard, 1988). Perhaps these studies identify some of the unique issues Black graduate students may confront while pursuing degrees.

With respect to interpersonal relationships, the advisor–advisee relationship may be one of the most important alliances a student forms in graduate school. In general, advisors have several critical responsibilities where students are concerned such as (a) assisting in curriculum selection, (b) providing research guidance, (c) enhancing professional development and (d) serving as an advocate and friend. In addition, advisors must be aware of and sensitive to some of the unique cultural issues which influence the advisor–advisee relationship. The advisor should also be prepared to help the Black student filter through racial overtones which influence academic performance. If the advisor is unable to address these issues, it is likely that cultural differences will negatively impact the advisor–advisee relationship. Difficulties in this kind of relationship may adversely affect the achievement and retention of a student.

In addition, most graduate programs have low Black student enrollments and few, if any, Black faculty members. A Black student is likely to be isolated in a program that lacks both formal and informal support systems. White professors and students frequently expect Black students to adhere to all the same cultural norms as Whites. For some Black students, expression of their own cultural norms (i.e., values, communication styles) results in disapproval by faculty and White students. The irony of this situation is that talented Black students are often accepted into graduate programs under the pretense that programs want to demonstrate their commitment to diversity. However, Black students are often penalized for being culturally different. This situation may at the very least frustrate the Black student.

The manner in which cultural issues are dealt with in graduate program curriculum is also problematic. Most graduate disciplines are the product of the Euro-American cultural world view. For example, Katz (1985) suggests that the Euro-American world view is the foundation of the discipline of psychology. The paradigms of science and/or practice that students are trained in are rooted in a perspective that does not account for or respect culturally different conceptualizations. The underlying White cultural views are consistently imparted through curriculum, texts, and training experiences with very little recognition of alternative perspectives. It is frequently the case that the significant contributions of Black researchers and scholars are not incorporated into the standard curriculum. This very often communicates a devaluing of diversity and/or a lack of awareness of other cultural perspectives. White faculty and administrators need to take into consideration the cultural biases inherent in the graduate curriculum and the impact these biases may have on Black students. Sensitivity to cultural issues in this aspect of graduate training may have a positive effect on Black student retention.

Research training/requirements is another area where sensitivity and receptivity are necessary. Conducting research may present a number of hurdles for the Black student. For instance, research topics that focus on minority issues are not well received by the academic community. White faculty commonly characterize such interests as unworthy, an attitude that when compounded with the usual environmental pressures, makes graduate school intolerable. In situations where attention to minority issues are respected, there may not be faculty in the department who are qualified to mentor student's research on such topics. This may result in the student feeling frustrated and stifled. These experiences and feelings may lead to psychological and possibly physical withdrawal from the program. Thus, considerable attention must be given to how faculty support and foster student interest in conducting research.

Conclusion

If colleges and universities have as goals increasing cultural diversity and recruiting Black students in disciplines requiring graduate education, new channels of recruitment must be established and maintained. Also a total commitment to cultural diversity and recruitment must address the retention issue as well. Considerable attention must be given to the graduate student environment. Graduate education at predominantly White universities is a product of White cultural values which are communicated through advisory relationships, curriculum requirements, and research training. While this is not a criticism of White values, it can become problematic for non-White students when alternative cultural styles are not acknowledged and respected.

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